

Building Emotional Stability in Youth with Autism

Guiding youth to become their most true selves is important for their emotional stability. To parents and advocates, this can seem complicated especially when their disability is not well understood by others or when their disability overshadows their strengths. Much is written and practiced about strategies that correct negative behaviors so individuals can fit in a setting or in a group. While these strategies are helpful in early childhood, the truth is childhood interventions including ABA are incomplete for the teen or young adult. It is the overemphasis, 'fixing' one's behavior or correcting social responses that can lead to a cycle of frustration, as the individual receives messages "I am not good enough." This cycle of frustration leads to emotional instability.

I had a client, a mom of a 19-year son with autism. She claimed, that once he successfully learned all the necessary social skills, then he can go out into the community to get a job." I empathized with her sadness and determination, fully recalling 1000s of times I exposed my son Trent to environments where he did not always respond appropriately. I then asked her, "Where do people learn social skills best? How is preventing your son from entering different settings helping his ability to interact, participate, or building his flexibility to adapt? What will isolation do to his emotional stability? The root truth is our youth cannot fully experience social and skill adaptations in only a closed setting.

Youth with ASD (related disabilities) learn best when they have opportunities and broad creative supports to experience new skills and environments. Examples of supports that affect a person's behavior: physiological, structural, environments, and people. People with autism adapt when they feel safe around others who accept them. They enjoy and grow from experiences when their personal interests, strengths, and talents are used and accentuated.

Martin Seligman said it best, "Curing the negatives does not produce the positives."

Below is a short checklist to guide you in building emotional stability in the teen or young adult:

a) That the individual knows he truly matters, that he is somebody, one who has a place and a group to belong to:

b) That basic needs are met and satisfied;
sleep,

nutrition,
cleanliness surroundings,
medical care, therapy &
education or training.

c) The opportunity to explore interests; enjoy certain activities, and share events with others.

d) Takes part, acts, and pursues interests with goals that have personal importance and meaning. It is about having persons in life in which he or she feels safe and are “go to” people for support. These things, persons, or interests enhance the individual's connectedness to others, to associations, friends, and community (i.e, church).

Perhaps they need us to see something in them that is valuable. They need us to believe they are OK just who they are, disability and all, and that is more than outward appearances. Lastly, when we notice their interests and strengths, and build broad creative supports, these help cultivate their unique positive contributions.

Through belonging, people find acceptance.

Through self worth, people feel love.

Through capability, people feel secure.

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